LGBT: equally entitled to human rights and dignity

Anne C Richard

Attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues are rapidly improving in the United States. Barriers to equal treatment and opportunity are coming down. Recognition that LGBT rights are universal rights is gaining ground. While much work remains to be done, the trend, finally, is positive.

But greater respect for LGBT rights and inclusion of LGBT people still is not a worldwide movement. In too many countries, it is illegal to be gay, punishable by imprisonment and even death. In some societies, the simple assertion of human rights and fundamental freedoms by members of the LGBT community – rights enshrined in international law – is met with oppression, abuse and ostracism. LGBT people become targets simply because of who they are. Their treatment in these countries and societies is grotesque and unacceptable.

The United States' position on LGBT rights and treatment is unambiguous. It was clearly articulated by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a December 2011 address in Geneva:

It is a violation of human rights when people are beaten or killed because of their sexual orientation, or because they do not conform to cultural norms about how men and women should look or behave.

It is a violation of human rights when governments declare it illegal to be gay, or allow those who harm gay people to go unpunished.

It is a violation of human rights when lesbian or transgendered women are subjected to so-called corrective rape, or forcibly subjected to hormone treatments, or when people are murdered after public calls for violence toward gays, or when they are forced to flee their nations and seek asylum in other lands to save their lives.

And it is a violation of human rights when life-saving care is withheld from people because they are gay, or equal access to justice is denied to people because they are gay, or public spaces are out of bounds to people because they are gay.

No matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we are, we are all equally entitled to our human rights and dignity.

The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) has a mandate to assist vulnerable, forcibly displaced people worldwide. We help design, build and maintain an international system of aid and protection for people persecuted at home and while in transit. We work hand-in-glove with international and non-governmental organisations, with faith-based communities and with resettlement agencies to shield victims from harm and to help them recover from crisis and rebuild their lives.

LGBT victims of persecution and abuse are a focus of PRM's efforts globally. Our training, policy guidance and strategies all emphasise vigilance and sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable LGBT refugees, migrants and others. We have research specifically focused on shrinking LGBT refugee protection gaps. Our diplomatic outreach encourages greater respect for LGBT rights and speaks plainly and forcefully against those who prey on people perceived as weak or different. Most importantly, our effort is not a bureaucratic exercise. It is a personal commitment of my colleagues in PRM and in partner organisations to identify and protect LGBT refugees and other victims who have been forced to flee their homes or hide their identities.

The United States, like all nations, has more work to do to protect the rights of LGBT people. But our leadership is rooted in the solid progress we have achieved at home and our determination to press for improvements abroad and it will continue. In that spirit, I salute the editors of Forced Migration Review for their leadership in examining these topics from different geographic and thematic vantage points and for their willingness to shine a bright light on these compelling issues.

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